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George Connor

LITTLE BIG MAN | Smallest of infants turned out to be one of the giants of college and pro football

August 10, 2008 **BY NEIL HAYES**
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She was a nurse. He was a doctor. They consulted with the medical minds at Mercy Hospital and agreed with the heartbreaking prognosis. Their infant, who was born three months prematurely and was no bigger than his father's fist, was not strong enough to survive.

Charles and Esther Connor brought their baby home to die.

The 20th Greatest Athlete in Chicago History, as voted on by a panel of Sun-Times writers and editors, was fed boiled cabbage and carrot juice every hour for the first several months of his life in 1925. If not for his mother's devotion, George Connor likely would not have survived, let alone thrived as the original Monster of the Midway, a dominant two-way starter who began a tradition of linebackers that includes Bill George, Dick Butkus, Mike Singletary and Brian Urlacher.

At 6-3 and 240 pounds, the former "preemie" was an imposing figure on the football field, especially after moving from defensive tackle to linebacker.

"At the time, George seemed like a giant," former Bears teammate Jim Dooley once told the Sun-Times. "When he hit someone, he made contact like no one else did. He was a great leader, and he had such a way of telling stories. Just amazing. He loved being an Irishman."

Connor didn't appear to be on the path to the College or Pro Football halls of fame when he arrived at De La Salle as a 5-5, 135-pound freshman. Not big enough to play on the line, he failed to make the team as a running back. He eventually won over his coach by showing up for practice every afternoon even after being cut. By his sophomore year, he had grown four inches and gained 30 pounds and soon would develop into an all-state lineman.

Connor attended Holy Cross because his uncle had been a football and basketball star at the school and was president of its alumni association. He started at tackle as a freshman and earned recognition on some All-America teams.

After a stint in the Navy during World War II, he transferred to Notre Dame to be closer to his ill father and established himself as the dominant lineman on one of the most dominant teams in college football history. The Irish never lost a game with Connor in uniform.

In 1946, Connor led a defense that allowed four touchdowns and no extra points all season. He was named an All-American for the second consecutive season and was the recipient of the first Outland Trophy as the top collegiate lineman in the country.

Connor was Chicago through and through. He insisted on playing for George Halas' Bears,

forcing the Boston Yanks to trade him to Chicago, where he became as dominant on both sides of the ball as he had been at Notre Dame.

His greatest fame came in 1949, when assistant coach Hunk Anderson told Connor to stand in the middle of the field in an attempt to defend a Philadelphia Eagles attack that featured Steve Van Buren running sweeps behind future Hall of Fame receiver Pete Pihos. Just like that, the Bears' tradition of Hall of Fame-caliber linebackers began.

"It was like a freight train coming at you, so Hunk Anderson moved me out from [defensive] tackle and said: 'Wherever Pihos goes, you go. If he takes a drink of water, you take a drink of water. If he goes to the bathroom, you go to the bathroom,'" Connor, who passed away in 2003, once told the Sun-Times. "The first play, Van Buren goes 37 yards for a touchdown. The second play, we stop him and go on to win 38-21. That's how the three-linebacker set began."

His violent tackle of the Green Bay Packers' Veryl Switzer on a kick return in a 1955 game forever will be etched in Bears lore. Connor hit Switzer with such ferocity that the returner's helmet went one way and the ball another, allowing George to scoop up the ball and score a touchdown.

Connor made history again when he sacked Baltimore Colts quarterback George Shaw, breaking his face mask and nose and knocking out several teeth. The injury opened the door for little-known Johnny Unitas, who went on to become the biggest star in the NFL in the 1950s and '60s.

Connor's combination of brains and brawn made him the entire package. He so excelled at diagnosing opponents' plays that he once lined up at right linebacker and intercepted a pass Detroit Lions quarterback Bobby Layne threw to the left side of the field.

"You're not supposed to be over there, you big ape," Layne told Connor.

"I'll remember that next time, Bobby," Connor replied.

Connor, who was elected to the College Football Hall of Fame in 1963 and the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1975, retired after the 1955 season because of a knee injury.

The only hangup on this day? The national anthem stopped about 10 seconds before it was supposed to. Phelps just laughed on the stand.

By then, the game was changing. The tiniest of babies became an NFL giant, only to feel small again when his career ended.

"I came into the league as a big man. I left as a little man. And I didn't change size," he once said.

The George Connor file

Full name: George Leo Connor. **Sport:** Football. **High school:** De La Salle. **Colleges:** Holy Cross, Notre Dame. **Career highlights:** All-state selection at De La Salle. In 1946, became first player to win Outland Trophy as nation's outstanding lineman. Captain of Notre Dame's 1957 national championship team. Selected as member of Notre Dame's all-time 11 in 1962. Averaged 54 minutes per game in pro career. Offensive/defensive tackle was first player named All-Pro on both sides of the ball in same NFL season. Later shifted to standing position behind the line and became prototype linebacker. Named All-Pro eight times and was only player to be named All-Pro on offense and defense for three consecutive years. Gained rare distinction of being named All-Pro at three positions: offensive tackle, defensive tackle and linebacker. Selected to the NFL's All-Decade team for the 1940s and was a first-team selection on offense and defense for the All-Decade team of the 1950s. Named to Sports Illustrated's All-Century team. Elected to College Football Hall of Fame in 1963. Elected to Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1975.

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